NOT JUST FOR SPIES: MANAGING MULTIPLE IDENTITIES FOR FUN AND PROFIT

M. LIFFERS[1]

[1] *Murdoch University, Perth, WA, m.liffers@murdoch.edu.au*

ABSTRACT

Social networking and media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are the primary communication tools used by many of our clients and colleagues. They provide an excellent opportunity for frank two-way communication. Like spies portrayed in popular movies and TV shows, many of us who use these sites daily do not want our personal and professional lives to collide. Some information professionals even choose to completely avoid social networking sites out of privacy concerns. Fortunately, maintaining the separation is not as difficult as it may seem. This paper highlights a variety of strategies and tools that can be used to manage distinct personal and professional online presences, without becoming subject to confusion, being terminated or having to tie up loose ends. Examples will be drawn from the author's own online presence as well as some other real-life cases where mistakes were made but successfully navigated.

1. WHO ARE YOU TODAY?

Even if we are not conscious of doing so, we all exhibit different behaviour in different aspects of our life. Our company, situation and mood will bring different aspects of our personality to the fore. Think about yourself. Do you behave differently with family members than you do with friends? How do you behave at work compared to when you are having social drinks at a bar? Even though we still remain the same person, we express different aspects of ourselves at different times.

This behaviour is perfectly natural. Cultural and social customs dictate how we behave in every day situations. The most extreme example of this is of children to people that have migrated from a conservative society to a more liberal society. It is not uncommon for the children to appear to maintain traditional values with their parents, then behave radically different when with friends.

Many people extend this behaviour to the Internet. They exhibit a particular personality and apply that to every kind of social networking they use. Unfortunately, the Internet makes it very easy for private and professional lives to collide. What we think is a private remark can become very public. A moment's indiscretion can have disastrous results for one's career or even future career.

2. WHAT IS PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL NETWORKING?

For a long time, social networking was only seen as a frivolous exercise for personal use. Sites such as Friendster (launched 2002), Orkut (launched 2002) and Myspace (launched 2003) led the initial charge, but now social networking is dominated by Facebook and, to a lesser extent, Twitter (Alexa Internet, Inc 2011).

The utility of social networking for building professional relationships has already been established many times in many different sectors (Beher et al. 2010; Kriescher 2009). Not only useful for simple professional networking, there has been a growing recognition of the value of using social networking for the development of personal learning networks (Miller 2010; Warlick 2009).

LinkedIn, a business-oriented social network, was launched in 2003. It allows users to build up a profile resembling a résumé and connect with current and former colleagues, professional contacts and clients – anybody with whom they have done business. It now enjoys 100 million users worldwide. As it has always been marketed as a business-oriented network, the tone of LinkedIn is very different to that of, say, Facebook. For example, users can add contacts directly, but also request an introduction from a mutual contact – an approach taken from real-life networking.

For the purposes of this paper, professional social networking refers to social networking between individuals to further their career. It does not refer to the use of social networking sites by organisations to market their products or services to consumers, such as Facebook fan pages.

3. CASE STUDIES IN SOCIAL NETWORKING

There have several high-profile (and not-so-high-profile) cases where the misuse of social networking has had a serious impact on a person's career. We will now explore two cases, each with a different outcome.

3.1. Catherine Deveny and The Age

In 2010, Melbourne comedian Catherine Deveny, who also worked as a columnist for The Age, was live-tweeting the Logies. She made several remarks that were considered inappropriate by The Age and her column was axed. Some of her unwise tweets included "Rove [McManus] and Tasma [Walton] look so cute! I hope she doesn't die too #logies" and "I so do hope that Bindi Irwin gets laid #logies". Both of these tweets are still available on Twitter (Deveny 2010b, Deveny 2010c).

After being informed by The Age that her services were no longer required, she defended her actions in an interview with Jon Faine (Chvastek 2010), claiming that Twitter is like "passing notes in class". Needless to say, The Age did not agree with her when it terminated her employment.

Whether or not members of the general public would find her comments offensive, the important thing is that Ms Deveny's employer did not approve of them. Her career as a comedian was not considered to be an appropriate defence and therefore she was let go.

Thankfully, for Ms Deveny's sake, her career does not appear to have suffered. Her personal website indicates that her previously sold-out show "God is Bullshit" has been given a second run for the Melbourne International Comedy Festival (Deveny 2010a). Despite her medium-term success, one must bear in mind that what will work for a comedian may not work for a librarian. Compared to most librarians, comedians are public performers and celebrities. It is common for them to draw their comedy material from own lives and be deliberately controversial.

3.2. Gettng slizzerd

In early 2011, the official American Red Cross Twitter account posted a very unusual message:

"Ryan found two more 4 bottle packs of Dogfish Head's Midas Touch beer…. When we drink we do it right #gettngslizzerd"

It turns out that Gloria Huang, a self-described "social media person" at the Red Cross accidentally tweeted using the wrong account – the message was intended for friends. The timeline of events that followed is quite clear and has been documented (Stopera 2011), thanks to the power of social networking.

What is unclear whether Ms Huang was the subject of any disciplinary action, she kept her position at the Red Cross. In fact, the publicly good-humoured response by the Red Cross about her faux pas resulted in a public relations win for the organisation, with the tweets prompting many people to donate to the organisation.

Wendy Harman, the Social Media Director at the American Red Cross later posted to the Red Cross blog, thanking everybody for their support (Harman 2011).

4. STRATEGIES FOR PROFITABLE SOCIAL NETWORKING

We cannot always be assured of an understanding employer when it comes to matters of social networking. What we can do, however, is take precautions when it comes to building our online professional identity.

Last year, German lawmakers drafted legislation to prevent companies from looking up applicants on Facebook during a selection and recruitment process (Spiegel Online 2011). This came under a broader banner of protecting worker privacy. Unfortunately, most other countries would not even consider similar legislation, so it's up to users to protect themselves.

4.1. The right tool for the job

Different social networking sites attract different audiences, provide different functions and are therefore appropriate for different purposes. With respect for the need to "play" with sites to learn about them, careful consideration must be taken when deciding which site to use for which audience.

Professional only	Blended	Personal only
LinkedIn	Delicious	Facebook
Yammer	Flickr	foursquare
	last.fm	LiveJournal
	LibraryThing	MeinVZ
	Personal website	
	RunKeeper	
	TripIt	
	Twitter	

Table 1 - Example use of social networking sites

Table 1 illustrates how the author uses different social networking sites to reach different audiences. This is by no means a prescriptive list, merely an example of how one person handles his online presence.

LinkedIn is the only site that he uses solely for the purpose of networking with other professionals external to Murdoch University. Yammer is the only site dedicated to networking with fellow employees within the University.

The majority of social networking sites he uses have content that is appropriate for all audiences – professional and personal. Anything posted on these "blended audience" sites is PG-rated and would not cause any sort of embarrassment or contention, unless the posts are deliberately made to encourage intelligent debate on a particular topic.

Most of the blended sites have very specific focuses, and they aren't necessarily for work purposes. For example, last.fm shows the author's music tastes, LibraryThing catalogues his personal book collection and RunKeeper allows for sharing of his exercise regime. He is generally willing to "friend" professional contacts on these sites, but he takes advantage of privacy controls to hide certain personal information. Privacy controls are covered in greater detail in section 4.2.

Finally, social networking sites regarded as "personal only" are strictly that. He only connects to actual friends on these sites and does not add professional contacts. Although everybody's definition of a "friend" is different, the author generally asks himself whether he would invite that person to a party or not.

4.2. Keeping private things private

Private posts becoming very public are a serious issue. In some professions, such as medicine, there has already been much research undertaken in this area and guidelines developed (Landman et al. 2010). We can learn much from them.

Privacy controls are offered by most social networking sites and allow users to restrict who may see their profile and/or posts. Some sites offer very simple privacy controls, others offer complex controls that offer granular control over every aspect of a user's online presence.

On the simple side of things is Twitter. Your profile may be either "Protected" or not protected. Protecting your profile hides your tweets from users that you are not following. In order to allow another user to see what you are tweeting, you must follow them. You cannot selectively protect tweets – it is an all-or-nothing approach.

In the middle of the spectrum are sites like RunKeeper. RunKeeper uses GPS data to display maps of workouts that users can share with other people in order to keep up motivation for exercise. A user can set a map to be completely public (open to the world), completely private (only the poster can view it) or only shared to the user's group of authorised friends, known as a Street Team. The ability to protect maps is particularly important, as they may reveal where a user lives or works.

Facebook takes privacy controls to possibly the most complex out of any of the major social networking sites. Users can dictate the privacy of each and every piece of information they put on the site. They can also dictate the privacy for different custom groups of friends. The degree of control that Facebook affords is very high and can actually be confusing for some people. By default, a lot of information is made public on Facebook and users must actively lock their profiles down.

Experimenting with privacy controls and observing what happens when each option is changed is an excellent way of become familiar with them.

4.3. Auditing

Some people have been active Internet users for a very long time and there may be long-forgotten content on the Internet that could affect employment prospects. Although a seemingly vain Google search for one's own name could help find some of this content, there are other sites such as pipl that

specialise in searching for information about people. It allows searchers to not only search based on names, but also email addresses, phone numbers and usernames.

Using a specialised search engine has the potential to dig up potentially detrimental posts made with the ignorance of youth. The owners of web sites containing these posts could then be contacted and asked nicely to remove the content.

4.4. Lifestreaming

Many social networking sites allow users to link accounts from different sites together and automatically cross post to each other. For example, a user can configure RunKeeper to automatically post to Twitter and Facebook when a workout is completed. Twitter can then be monitored by sites like LinkedIn and Yammer, so that they automatically add tweets to a profile.

This can be a simple and easy to way to let others trace a user's social media presence. By friending or following a person using one social network, following cross posts make it simple to find them in others.

Although a user may find it convenient to connect all his or her profiles to each other, it is important to remember the audience for each social networking site. Are your Twitter followers really interested in how often you track your workouts in RunKeeper? Automatically posting from RunKeeper to Twitter may make it easier to elicit words of encouragement from followers, but is it really polite to flood their feeds with workouts? If last.fm were to automatically post to Twitter every time a user starts listening to a new song, they would probably find most of their followers leaving them out of sheer annoyance.

4.5. Bringing it all together

If a user is really keen for others to find them in all the social networks they use, or are willing to admit to using, a simple strategy is the construction of a social networking hub. This hub does not need to be very complex at all – just a simple web page with links to a single user's profiles.

There are many options for presenting a social networking hub. Some people use a dedicated page on some sort of personal web presence, like a blog. Others use services like flavors.me, which lets you put together a hub without any knowledge of HTML, although they do charge for their service.

If a user wishes their social networking hub to be the go-to place for their online presence, they will need to take steps to make sure that it can be easily found. Hosting at a vanity domain, which is generally the same as the user's real name or most commonly-used Internet handle, is a good strategy to increase its findability. For example, the author hosts a blog containing his social networking hub at matthiasliffers.com. A quick Google search for "Matthias Liffers" will return that domain as the top hit.

4.6. When things go pear-shaped

Despite best efforts, a situation may arise where use of social networks can potentially result in negative consequences. This might be something as innocent as a misinterpreted comment or as tragic as an ill-posted venting of frustration.

There is no sure fire way to completely avoid any sort of fallout, short of not making silly posts in the first place. However, should a user manage to offend anyone, the author can only make one recommendation: delete the post, apologise and hope for forgiveness.

5. APPENDIX: WEB SITES MENTIONED IN THIS PAPER

Site	Purpose	URL
Delicious	Saving and sharing bookmarks	http://www.delicious.com/
Facebook	Generic social networking	http://www.facebook.com/
Flavors.me	Easy creation of social networking hubs	http://flavors.me/
Flickr	Photo and image sharing	http://www.flickr.com/
Foursquare	Location sharing	http://foursquare.com/
Friendster	Generic social networking	http://www.friendster.com/
Last.fm	Music and concerts	http://last.fm/
LibraryThing	Cataloguing personal book collections	http://www.librarything.com/
LinkedIn	Business-oriented social networking	http://www.linkedin.com/
LiveJournal	Blogging	http://www.livejournal.com/
MeinVZ	Germany's most popular social networking site	http://www.meinvz.net/
Myspace	Social entertainment	http://www.myspace.com/
Orkut	Generic social networking	http://www.orkut.com/
Pipl	People searching	http://pipl.com/
RunKeeper	Exercise tracking and sharing	http://runkeeper.com/
TripIt	Travel tracking and sharing	http://www.tripit.com/
Twitter	Microblogging	http://twitter.com/
Yammer	Enterprise microblogging	http://www.yammer.com/

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